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Review

POLITICS AND GENERALS

Winfield Scott and Robert E. Lee at the gates of Mexico City

Dyja, Thomas

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Shaara, Jeff *Gone for Soldiers: A Novel of the Mexican War*. Ballantine Books, ISBN 345427505

I don't believe any writer could create a fictional war better than the truth of the Civil War. The characters and settings, seething passions and inhuman horrors, dramatic twists and turns, a whopper climax at Gettysburg, and the tragic, inevitable road to the sequel-begging ending at Appomattox -- only Homer got close, and *that* was a real war, too. Maybe that's why fiction writers have produced at best only a handful of works that fully express the War, that marry the artistic requisites of timeless truth and beauty with the temporal realities of history. The finest literature about that period comes from those who were there and the historians who have tried to pull apart the threads of time and weave them back together so that we can try to understand. Next to the battlefields of Antietam and the Wilderness, fiction seems a sorry imitation of the truth.

Jeff Shaara stands among the most noble of those of us who try to wrap our pens and minds around the enormity of the Civil War, and he is one of the few to come close to succeeding. Constantly finding nobility in those he writes about, Shaara takes us into the heart of the myth, lets us live on Olympus for a while with the generals, and does not try to compete with history. Creating heroes is very much his business, and to that extent he is a mythmaker, a writer of epics that have the greater glory of their subjects as their goal.

Shaara's approach has not changed in **Gone for Soldiers**, nor have many of his subjects, but he has moved his setting from the green hills of wartime Virginia to the lava fields of Central Mexico during the Mexican-American War. Shaara picks up the story after General Zachary Taylor has lost steam following the victory over Santa Anna at Buena Vista. General Winfield Scott, that

cantankerous and controversial veteran of the War of 1812, leads a new invasion on the eastern coast of Mexico at Vera Cruz, aided to no small degree by the canny advance work and wise counsel of engineer Captain Robert E. Lee.

As Scott pushes towards Mexico City, it is hard to say who is his greatest adversary -- Mexican dictator Santa Anna; President Polk, who is giving Scott only enough rope to hang any political intentions the general may have; or his staff of officers, men whose ambitions are matched only by their ineptitude. Despite the scorpions and the second-guessing of his generals, Scott and his army forge on through the battles of Cerro Gordo, Padierna, Churubusco, and Chapultepec to the taking of Mexico City. Mercifully, Shaara spares us the subsequent protracted negotiations and occupation that followed.

The shift in scenery helps and hurts. While most readers (one imagines) knew the outcome of the battles in *Gods and Generals* and *Last Full Measure*, relying on Shaara's considerable talents to make that knowledge seem like something they'd just learned in those pages, few Americans can honestly claim that they can name the major battles of the Mexican-American War, let alone who won them. For once, though, ignorance is a virtue; with relatively unknown material at his disposal, Shaara briskly drives the U.S. forces to Mexico City, building suspense at each battle, all towards the climactic storming of the gates of the capital. Given his ability to make the familiar fresh in his first two books, Shaara expertly immerses us in the details and surroundings of this less-studied time and place, and draws compelling scenes of battle that send the heart racing. The thrilling scouting journeys of Lee that he relates will surely enter the canon of Lee lore.

The problem is that the Mexican-American War lacks the inherent drama of the Civil War, that bigger-than-fiction quality that keeps the fires burning North and South. Shaara chooses to play down the Mexican War's place in the increasing sectional conflict growing at this time, and the

cautionary comparisons Shaara and others have made between the messy political nature of the Mexican War and Vietnam feel strained. Westmoreland was no Scott; Henry Kissinger bore little resemblance to diplomat Nicholas Trist; and as unpopular and political as the Mexican War may have been, Scott did walk into the central plaza of Mexico City and salute the U.S. flag after a series of difficult, but fairly decisive victories. Even deeper, all wars are to a greater or lesser extent messy and political.

As usual, Shaara presents the action through the eyes of various luminaries: here usually either Lee or Scott, two honorable men bonded by their loyalty to nation and their common sense. Yet for all the hand wringing of his characters, we never hear the grumbling in the front lines, only the politics and the generals. The human cost is less fully felt. In the Civil War books, the gilded portraits of the heroic generals stood in relief to the everyday soldiers that we already had a sense of, in a conflict that we knew. Shaara was filling in a gap, adding a melody. Here, limited as many readers will be by their ignorance of the conflict and the portions of it that Lee and Scott (and hence we) see, Shaara can't rely on our own knowledge of the war to provide the other, unspoken strains, the tragic chords of the common man that we play to ourselves while reading *Gods and Generals* and *The Last Full Measure*. As he has Scott himself say at a press conference after the war is won, "Generals aren't heroes. The heroes are still out there, patrolling the streets, walking their posts, or buried in that ground. That's my challenge to you. Write about that. And leave the politics and the damned generals out of it." Yet Jeff Shaara's best writing is about a general; the general, to some. In Lee he finds his ultimate hero, and this devotion is what shines most brightly in this and his other books. At times it seems that Lee is the real point of all three, and in fact I'd have been happy if all of **Gone for Soldiers** had been from Captain Lee's eyes, for it's in Lee that Shaara truly opens himself to the complexities of human nature.

While his short portraits of Santa Anna, Nicholas Trist, and other secondary characters can drift towards stock, Shaara lets Lee wander through all the chambers of his heart and mind, revealing a man by turns brilliant, courageous, priggish, generous, nave, fearful, honorable, judgmental, and maybe even noble to a fault, like that other great losing general, Hector, who chose loyalty over cause. Shaara's Lee is, in the end, his greatest creation, maybe more so than any single title. By giving voice to this profound and retiring titan of American history, Jeff Shaara accomplishes his stated goal of offering a gift to the Confederate general. As Sandburg once did for Lincoln, Shaara has humanized the mythos of Lee as no one ever has and, in doing, makes an enduring contribution to literature.

Thomas Dyja is author of Play for a Kingdom.